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ABSTRACT

A discussion of the role of the Southern Conference on Language Teaching (SCOLT) on its 25th anniversary addresses the following issues: (1) whether the organization has carried out its primary objective of advancing the learning and teaching of languages at all instructional levels; (2) whether SCOLT has worked to its fullest in fostering close ties with its national umbrella organization, the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, and constituents on the state and local levels; and (3) what it can do to strengthen its role, position, and impact in the foreign language field. It is suggested that the regional organization's role is to strengthen the support of affiliates by offering strong leadership and a supportive sense of purpose; sustain faith in the value of the field and in working relationships with affiliates; subsidize innovative programs within the region; maintain the current impetus in foreign language education, paying particular attention to teachers' concerns; advance its leadership role and that of state and local affiliates by creating strong networks; advocate change in the profession as needed; and promote the value of foreign language study. Beyond that, it is proposed, the rest is up to the individual teacher. (MSE)

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SCOLT: PERSPECTIVES FOR THE FUTURE 1990+

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On this twenty-fifth anniversary of SCOLT, let's take a few minutes to look ahead and determine where the organization is headed and where it should be going.[1]

This is truly a time to feel good about being part of a regional organization whose goal is to join together the various state organizations in the South to provide links between the states and to strengthen the role of foreign language education.

This is also a time to look at ourselves critically and to ask several important questions:

1. Has SCOLT in fact carried out its primary objective to advance the "learning and teaching of languages at all levels of instruction"? (SCOLT, 1986)
2. Has it worked to its fullest in fostering close ties not only between ACTFL, the national umbrella organization, but more importantly between us and our constituents on the different state and local levels?
3. What can SCOLT do to strengthen its role, its position, and its impact? This is perhaps the most important of the three asked. In other words, is SCOLT simply going to continue to promote the study of foreign languages, to talk about and research the status quo, or will it begin to address

[1]Speech delivered October 10, 1989, at the Twenty-fifth Southern Conference on Language Teaching Anniversary Celebration, Little Rock, Arkansas.

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the needs of foreign language educators and students?

Let us not be complacent. If one takes the last question seriously and if it is heeded as a challenge, the status quo should no longer be acceptable. There has been a strong resurgence of interest in foreign language study. Enrollment in our courses is at an all-time high. More and more states are beginning to implement high school and college foreign language graduation requirements as well as college entrance requirements. There is more and more talk and action to reintroduce foreign languages in the elementary schools. At least foreign language study is not still relegated to the category of "frill courses for the elite." The profession has received favorable press since the 1979 publication of Strength through Wisdom, the report of the President's Commission on Foreign Language and International Studies. Articles have recently appeared about the importance of foreign languages and global education in the nation's business schools: "2nd language a salient business tool" by Sylvia Porter, and "B-Schools get a Global Vision" in Fortune magazine. Federal funding for our programs has been secured although often tacked on to bills for science and mathematics . . . but we have gotten funding. But is it enough?

Twenty-five years is a long time. SCOLT is not the "new kid on the block." There have been many changes in foreign language education over the past twenty-five years. There are some which are frankly better forgotten. Other changes have moved our field to its current position of high visibility and importance in the complete education of today's youth. There are indeed developments for which we can be congratulated.

But the task is assuredly not over; it has only just begun. As previously asked, is SCOLT simply going to continue to promote the study of foreign languages, to talk about and research the status quo, or is it to begin to address the needs of foreign language educators and students? Simply stated another way, are we going to continue to **react** to existing conditions or are we going to **proact**--to move ahead and address our specific needs and concerns?

The key role of a regional organization is to provide leadership for its affiliates--leadership through cooperation. This cooperation moves in two directions: upward toward our national foreign language organization, ACTFL (or perhaps more

accurately, ACTFL and the AAT's), and downward toward the state and local affiliates. We are indeed a key link in this chain of command, and, as trite as the saying may be, a chain is as strong as its weakest link. Complacency with our past successes should not cause us to relent. SCOLT has already shown a leadership role. Unfortunately, however, to cite one particular instance, its effort has not been given its true importance. The following description illustrates the point.

On January 31, 1985, in Las Vegas, representatives from the five regional conferences were welcomed as full voting members of the ACTFL Executive Council. At that meeting, the ACTFL by-laws were changed to reflect the increase in membership of the Executive Council from ten to fifteen, and the term of office of Council members was increased from three to four years. This addition to the Executive Council came about as a result of ACTFL's having appointed three different Regional Task Force Liaison coordinators who worked for several years with each of the regional conferences in an effort to strengthen its ties with both the regionals and with state affiliates, and primarily to address the five priority areas singled out for special attention in the field of foreign language education: teacher education, curriculum and materials development, public awareness, foreign language proficiency, and research. Each regional conference appointed a task force which was to work on each of the priority areas. SCOLT's topic was research. During my term as the Task Force Liaison, SCOLT was the only organization that carried out its charge, and that it did largely on its own and with impressive initiative. Through seeking funding from the Exxon Education Foundation, SCOLT was the first regional conference (and I might add the only one) to publish the results of its work in Research Within Reach: Research-guided Responses to the Concerns of Foreign Language Teachers, under the editorship of Thomas C. Cooper. In the foreword to this book, Professor Cooper (1985, xii) states: "Research Within Reach is a unique project. It represents an extended cooperative effort between a regional and national foreign language association, as well as cooperation among the various universities at which the task force members are employed."

Now to the real point: listen to the title of this SCOLT publication--Research Within Reach: Research-guided Responses to CONCERNS of Foreign Language Teachers (my emphasis). SCOLT did not react; it proacted. Of course, we have concerns.

The 1981 Conference on Professional Priorities held in Boston in conjunction with the ACTFL Annual Meeting singled out the five priorities. The regional task forces were charged with defining significant issues in its area, proposing directions for the profession and preparing a final report establishing realistic goals. SCOLT not only reacted to the charge, but gave us a forward look at one of our major concerns and not a simple state-of-the-art report. As Professor Cooper (vii) states: " . . . we decided first to discover from practitioners in the field what their most urgent questions were about foreign language learning and teaching. We then attempted to provide the answers by citing applicable research." Here is an instance where ingenuity addressed a specific concern, since " . . . most of the studies in the foreign language education are undertaken to satisfy the curiosity of and to benefit the investigators themselves, rather than to address concerns that actual classroom teachers have about language learning and pedagogy" (Cooper, 1985, vii). You are all familiar with the saying "Too many chiefs and no Indians." In reference to foreign language education for entirely too long, this might be stated more aptly as "Too many Indians and no chief." We must have a leader.

On the national level, ACTFL is that leader. On the regional level in the Southeast, SCOLT should be the leader. But none of us can act alone. ACTFL has strengthened its ties with its regional and state constituents by holding joint annual meetings (it met jointly with SCOLT in 1972, again in 1987 in Atlanta with over 2000 people in attendance, and will again in Nashville in 1990); by including regional representatives on its Executive Council; through the pending publication of its Leadership for Foreign Language Organizations: A Handbook.

An important question to ask is whether the regional organizations have been strengthening ties with their own affiliates? Has a concerted effort been made to create a strong network between SCOLT and the state organizations? Have effective lines of communications been established? Has SCOLT kept in touch with its affiliates throughout the year? Has it remained too insular with its annual meetings and not given teachers throughout its region the opportunity to attend and profit from these conferences?

In the Introduction to the leadership handbook are the statements: "The chapters offer suggestions and experience-based looks at many aspects of the effective management,

administration and running of state, district or regional foreign language associations. [. . .] We hope that [this handbook] will provide the basic structure around which a 'user's guide to effective leadership' may be built for each affiliate. [. . .] We . . . hope that this handbook will help strengthen and increase the ties between the national foreign language association and its constituent members, for ACFTL's strong leadership comes from strong member organizations" (Terry, n.d., i). In selecting the authors for the various chapters, Genelle Morain, editor of The Beacon for the Foreign Language Association of Georgia was asked to contribute a chapter, and she willingly wrote "The State Newsletter: Voice for Excellence."

We have another opportunity to highlight the outstanding contributions from our region. ACTFL has instituted the inclusion of selected presentations from regional conferences in its Annual Meeting program. These presentations are selected by each regional conference as "the best of . . ." and are recognized as such in the Annual Meeting program. Could this same structure be implemented in the SCOLT Annual Meeting?

ACTFL is making a strong, concerted effort to provide leadership and cooperative ventures between it, at the national level, and its constituent members. But the strength of these efforts goes two ways. What is SCOLT currently doing to maintain such a cooperative effort with its own affiliates? What else needs to be done?

Most certainly, SCOLT's mission is a reflection of ACTFL's mission:

> The mission of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages is to promote and foster the study of languages and cultures as an integral component of American education and society and to provide effective leadership for the improvement of teaching and learning at all levels of instruction in all languages. ACTFL accomplishes its mission through programs and projects that range from those influencing educational policies at the national level to those furnishing practical assistance to classroom teachers (ACTFL, 1987, 333).

SCOLT needs to take a strong look at the Central States Conference on Foreign Language Teaching (CSC) and its admirable efforts to provide links among the state organizations that are included in its membership. Central States is assuredly

a model for all other regionals. There is an excellent working relationship with the state affiliates and their leadership. CSC is a member of all state organizations included within its area. In addition, there are designated state representatives or liaisons of CSC in every state who facilitate communication throughout the year. At its Annual Meeting, Central States makes an effort to identify and recognize the state organizations through providing breakfasts for the presidents of the various state affiliates and by providing informative seminars on leadership or inviting nationally-recognized speakers to address them. Edward Scebold, Executive Director of ACTFL, and J. David Edwards from the Joint National Committee on Languages, for example. Finally, CSC holds joint conferences with various state organizations, offering them a financial rebate for each member of the host state organization attending the conference, with the monies returned to the treasury of that state organization (Thrush).

Part of the title of the SCOLT publication, Research Within Reach addresses a charge not only to SCOLT but to all who have made foreign language education their career: We **must** begin to provide Responses to the Concerns of Foreign Language Teachers. We **must** support and encourage the efforts to improve not only the profession in general but our own individual yet essential roles in foreign language teaching.

What is meant by "support"? Some synonyms of this verb are to "strengthen, to sustain, to subsidize, to maintain, to advance, to advocate, to promote." In a nutshell, here is my charge to regional organizations:

- **to strengthen** the support of our affiliates by offering them strong leadership and a supportive sense of purpose;
- **to sustain** our faith in the value of what we are doing and to sustain, if not improve, our working relationship with our affiliates;
- **to subsidize**, financially when possible, and with expert resource personnel, innovative programs within our region;
- **to maintain** the current impetus in foreign language education, paying particular attention to the concerns of teachers;
- **to advance** our own leadership role and that of our local and state affiliates by creating a strong system of networks both within the region and between us and ACTFL;

- **to advocate** change in the profession when and where change is needed, based on the concerns of its practitioners, locally, statewide, regionally and nationally;
- **to promote** the value of the study of another language.

The rest is up to each and every one of us.

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